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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 03 ABUJA 000496

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ABUJA 493, CORRECTING ALL TEXT. PLEASE CANCEL ABUJA 493

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: [NI](#)

SUBJECT: NIGERIA: PRESIDENTIAL BUSINESS FORUM ON HIV/AIDS

REFS: (A) ABUJA 2651 (B) ABUJA 03297

[1](#)1. Summary: On Saturday morning February 15, 2003, President Olusegun Obasanjo invited approximately 50 managing directors of Nigeria's most influential national and international companies to the Presidential Villa to discuss the creation of a Nigerian Business Coalition Against HIV/AIDS. By the end of this meeting, the managing directors of Chevron/ Texaco and MTN, the leading Nigerian wireless communication company, had accepted to co-chair the Coalition along with the President, and the business leaders had agreed upon an organizational meeting in Lagos in March. The President acknowledged at length the pioneering role of Ambassador Howard F. Jeter in advancing the involvement of the business sector through his luncheons with the U.S. business community focused on the national HIV/AIDS effort (see above referenced cable 03297). The Chairman of the National Action Committee on AIDS (NACA) also acknowledged the pivotal role of Ambassador Jeter in this area and of USAID in its support of NACA. In less than 6 months, as a result of Ambassador Jeter and USAID's interventions with the US business community, the involvement of the business sector in the HIV/AIDS effort has gone from an idiosyncratic affair to one of organized public commitment.

[1](#)2. Remarks by the NACA Chairman: After words of welcome by President Obasanjo, the Chairman of NACA, Professor Babatunde Osotimehin, opened the Presidential Forum by reviewing the epidemiological profile of HIV prevalence in Nigeria and the Federal Government of Nigeria's response to date. He cited the contributions of major donors, including USAID, to the national effort and reported that the federal government and donors have pledged over US\$400 million in HIV/AIDS funding for the next three years. Professor Osotimehin also stated, however, that Nigeria would require at least US\$ 500 million annually for the next 5 years to contain the epidemic. He cited the following activities as the most critical ones to be implemented: a) mass campaigns to raise public awareness and scale up community involvement; b) voluntary counseling and testing (VCT); c) care and support interventions, especially treatment of opportunistic infections and the scaling up of antiretroviral (ARV) treatment programs; d) services targeting particularly vulnerable groups such as long distance truck drivers, sex workers and youth both in and out of school; and e) the continuing need for capacity building for all levels of actors.

[1](#)3. Quoting Lee Smith, former President of Levi Strauss that 'It is inevitable that a company doing business in the developing world will pay for AIDS, it is just a question of when and how much', Professor Osotimehin then proceeded to outline potential private sector contributions to the national effort. These included i) company HIV/AIDS policies ii) awareness programs that include workplace discussion; iii) peer education; iv) IEC materials; v) condom distribution; vi) in-house counselors and VCT services; vii) post ' exposure prophylaxis policy and procedure; viii) ARV treatment and ix) home based care for AIDS symptomatic employees.

[1](#)4. Professor Osotimehin emphasized, 'The earlier the Nigerian business community engages with the issue, the greater the chance it has to mitigate the types of economic impacts already seen in Southern Africa'. He quoted a recent study undertaken by the Nigerian Employers Consultative Association to underscore the critical need for greater business sector involvement. According to this study, only 24% or slightly less than one quarter of managers in the private sector perceive the potential impact of HIV/AIDS on business concerns; only 32% or less than a third of firms undertook employee HIV/AIDS activities in fiscal 2001; and 45% or almost half of employees receive information about HIV/AIDS only from outside their workplace.

[1](#)5. As an outstanding instance of business sector involvement, Professor Osotimehin commended Coca Cola for the use of its

trucks for distribution as a major contribution to the massive awareness campaign. He also offered the following examples of how other companies might contribute: i) telecommunication companies: assistance in tele-networking, management information systems and monitoring and evaluation; ii) oil and related companies: technical assistance in project management and procurement; iii) other subsectors: contributions of their marketing skills, use of brand to carry messages, e.g. cell phone companies could display short HIV messages on a regular basis, provide toll free numbers for hotline information services; iv) hotel industry: provision of information and commodities to guests. He concluded this portion of his remarks by suggesting that all companies could espouse the 'Adopt a PLWA concept'. In this way, according to Professor Osotimehin, needy people living with AIDS (PLWA) would receive assistance and the business sector would also help reduce stigma.

16. Specifics of Business Sector Involvement: However, Professor Osotimehin was empathic that he was asking for more than private sector policies and programs. In his words, 'involvement of the private sector should go beyond the workplace' we are also asking the private sector to add its core competencies to the overall response. The NACA Chairman then summarized his request for private sector involvement as i) the establishment of work place initiatives; ii) the extension of these initiatives to the immediate communities where the companies work; and iii) active participation in the national response, e.g. private sector participation on the NACA board and, especially, in the establishment of the Nigerian Business Coalition Against HIV/AIDS.

17. President Obasanjo's Remarks: Both in his impromptu and prepared remarks, President Obasanjo echoed the theme of Ambassador Jeter during his organizational luncheons with the U.S. business community and by the NACA chairman in his presentation to the Forum. That is, even more than its financial resources, the business sector involvement in the national effort must include the contribution of its core competencies. In his opening remarks, the President specified that it was not the financial resources of the business sector that he wanted but rather their involvement in the national HIV/AIDS effort: 'Don't give me money, just help me put an end to HIV'. In his prepared remarks, the President reiterated this sentiment, 'Ladies and Gentlemen for the avoidance of doubt let me state quite clearly that this event is not meant to be seen as a fund raising exercise but one that seeks to raise the consciousness of corporate Nigeria to the facts about the epidemic and seek to recruit this important sector to join us in the fight. We expect that 'the private sector will allow us to utilize their core competencies in the fight and also let us share part of their sunk costs to leverage the fight.'.

18. Epidemic Impact on Nigeria: President Obasanjo began his prepared statement by discussing the economic threat of HIV/AIDS to the economy of Nigeria. He said that the pandemic is threatening 'the fabric of our economy' and that 'Nigerians cannot afford to wait any longer to redeem themselves from this dreadful infection' That is why I have called you together?. President Obasanjo also stressed that the burden of the epidemic is greatest in Africa. He quoted UNAIDS statistics that of the 40 million people infected with HIV, 28 million of these are in sub-Saharan Africa and that of the 14 million children orphaned by AIDS, 11 million of them are in the region. The President also estimated that the number of Nigerians infected with HIV is between 3.4 million and 4.5 million. This latter figure represents the highest estimate of the number of HIV positive persons in Nigeria ever given publicly by a top Nigerian official.

19. National Intelligence Council Report Quoted: The President also quoted at length the recent National Intelligence Council report on the five 'next wave' countries that will double or triple the number of global HIV/AIDS cases by 2010. Reiterating his previous theme, the President stressed that of these five countries--- Nigeria, China, India, Russia and Ethiopia---two are in sub-Saharan Africa. According to President Obasanjo the consequences of this report on Nigerian international relationships is immense. To quote the President, 'The implication of this report is that all nations of the world will be focusing on Nigeria and its reaction or response to the epidemic. If nothing is done quickly, this will affect our bilateral, economic and political relations with other countries'.

10. Marching Orders to the Business Sector: President Obasanjo ended his address by specifying his requests to the business sector: 'We are looking forward to your organizations setting up workplace initiatives and within the larger context of

communities in which you work you will contribute to the national response'. Furthermore we also see today's forum as the beginning 'of constructive engagement' we propose to launch the Nigerian Business Council (sic) on HIV/AIDS which I will co-chair with two other distinguished leaders from the private sector. The Council will be expected to provide the platform for subsequent discussions and decisions for the private sector in their effort to stem this epidemic'.

11. Appreciation of Ambassador Jeter: Before concluding his address, President Obasanjo cited the contribution of Ambassador Jeter: 'I particularly will like to extend the gratitude of our government to the American Ambassador Howard Jeter who independent of our thinking has institutionalized a consultative process with the American community in Nigeria sanitizing (sic) them to the HIV/AIDS situation in Nigeria. We believe a good number of them are here today because of this interaction'. Professor Osotimehin who credited the Ambassador for initiating efforts with the business community on behalf of the national HIV/AIDS effort echoed this appreciation. He also singularly expressed appreciation of USAID for its support of this effort and for its support of NACA.

12. Appointment of Two Business Sector Co-Chairs: Before he left the Forum to begin campaigning in the Delta, President Obasanjo invited Jay Parson, the Managing Director for Chevron/Texaco, and Adrian Wood, the Managing Director of MTN, the leading wireless communication company in the country, to co-chair with him the Nigerian Business Council on HIV/AIDS. In his words, 'I will not chair but will co-chair' we will be in the driver's seat together' and to emphasize this point he called the two co-chairs to sit with him at the Presidential Podium for the media to record this event. Parson immediately assumed the mantle of responsibility and promised to convene a meeting of the business sector in March. In his words, 'We will combine collective talents and skills and we will come back with decisions and strategies for the way forward'.

13. Summary: The success of this Forum must and will be judged by the future actions initiated by the Nigerian Business Coalition on HIV/AIDS. However it was a remarkable event and one that six months ago would have hardly been imaginable. The dynamic leadership of the new NACA Chairman who appears to have the confidence of the President has created a milieu for the national HIV and AIDS effort in which such innovation and concerted effort can occur (see above referenced cable 2651). Professor Osotimehin immediately took advantage of the opportunities resulting from Ambassador Jeter's initiative with the U.S. business community and the technical assistance and knowledge of the business world offered by the USAID consultant, Mr. Percy Wilson. The results of the luncheons proved that many businesses in Nigeria either were already involved in some more or less idiosyncratic fashion or that they were ready to become involved. These luncheons obviously were the stimulus behind and inspiration for this groundbreaking Forum. Mr. Wilson has become a confident of the NACA Chairman and mentors his dealings with the business community. In conclusion, the Mission would like to express its appreciation of AFR/SD for their role in the initiation of this activity with the offer of a consultant, Mr. Wilson, to develop a pilot business related activity in Nigeria.

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